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## **Aspirations and the Histories of Elite State Schools in London: Field Theory, Circuits of Education and the Embodiment of Symbolic Capital**

Sol Gamsu

### **Abstract**

Aspirations are frequently framed in Bourdieusian sociology with reference to *contemporary* dynamics of gender, class and race. Rather than focus simply on these identity markers to understand students' aspirations, I instead use Bourdieu's approach to history to explore how students' aspirations are shaped by schools' past struggles to gain dominance within the field of education. I draw on three approaches to history within Bourdieu's work: the coming together of institution and individual, the structural history which shapes the rules of the field, and the processes associated with the accumulation of symbolic capital which all dominant institutions must master. I conceptualize the aspirations of students as formed by the coming together of institutional and personal history, exploring how this occurs in two elite state schools in London. These schools sought to use students' aspirations to accrue prestige and re-position themselves as dominant institutions within the field. To extend Bourdieu, I also draw on what Ball et al. call 'circuits of education', which assists in theorizing institutional positions in the field of education, and how these positions are shaped by the dynamic movement of students toward elite universities through space and over time.

## Introduction

Students' aspirations to attend elite universities in the United Kingdom (UK) are embedded in hierarchies of secondary educational institutions that enable or prescribe certain university destinations (Reay, David and Ball 2001, 2005; Donnelly 2014). Schools and colleges are situated within local institutional hierarchies, and simultaneously nested within national hierarchies where they effectively compete to represent themselves as viable options for students who seek to attend elite universities. The field of post-16 education in the UK is a site of struggle for status.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary local and national hierarchies are formed by long institutional histories of struggles for dominant positions within the field. Therefore, I argue that student aspiration must be understood as significantly influenced by the institutional practices and strategies focused upon the accumulation of symbolic capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's approach to history (Bourdieu 1981, 1996: 189–229; Gorski 2013), this chapter will show how student aspirations are shaped by school histories as institutions seek to foster certain socio-spatial trajectories or 'circuits of education' (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1995) to elite universities.

In this chapter, I combine Bourdieu's concept of field, a multi-dimensional social space within which actors' positions are determined by their stock of cultural, economic, social and, especially, symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), with 'circuits of education', developed in the literature exploring the geographies of contemporary educational inequality in the UK (Ball et al. 1995). Combining these approaches allows us to see how prestige is generated over time for institutions through the socio-spatial movement of individuals. Institutional field here is understood as the hierarchy of schools and colleges at the point of university choice, with institutions partly positioned by the symbolic capital gained through

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sending their students to elite universities. The concept of circuits of schooling, which I apply here to examine the post-16 to university transition, was initially developed to analyse collective socio-spatial patterns in student trajectories and choices at age 11 (Ball et al. 1995). These movements of students may reflect the more individual aspirations of students, but their aspirations are, I argue, significantly shaped by institutional histories of strategies that have sought to directly and more tacitly encourage aspirations to elite universities. The repetition of circuits over time embeds and shapes the school's position within the field. Furthermore, these processes, which are historically cumulative in shaping student's aspirations, are also institutionally accumulative in providing schools with symbolic capital. To illustrate how aspirations can be understood as formed through the interaction of individual habitus and histories of school position takings within the field, I will draw on interviews with staff and students in two high-performing state schools in London, Halsham School and King Henry's School for Boys.<sup>2</sup> Both schools have engaged in the hierarchical struggle for status, and successfully re-positioned themselves as elite institutions over the last three decades, now sending large numbers of students to elite UK universities.

To address the relationship between the formation of student aspirations and the historic struggles of schools to gain dominance within the field of education, it is important to recognize that embedding circuits of education which will lead to elite universities requires a set of institutional strategies. These strategies respond both to specific political conditions (e.g. shifts in education policy around school admissions) and/or demographic conditions (neighbourhood population change and ethnic class formation). These strategies enabled both Halsham School and King Henry's School for Boys, as state schools, to re-position themselves within the dominant sub-field of London's schools where the historic private schools of the capital have traditionally dominated. Adopting a Bourdieusian lens, the

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aspirations of students currently attending these schools and seeking highly competitive admission to elite universities can be understood as formed ‘Between the socialized body and the social fields, two products of the same history that are generally attuned to each other, there develops an infra-conscious, corporeal complicity’ (Bourdieu 1993: 46).

In this chapter, I emphasize the importance of history. Specifically, I show how institutions create objectified histories which shape and align themselves with the embodied histories and ‘aspirations’ of students. Throughout Bourdieu’s work there is an attention to how institutional histories of the field combine homologically with the positioning of individuals resulting ‘from a historical process of progressive and collective creation that follows neither a plan nor an obscure immanent Reason’ (Bourdieu 1996: 227). As he describes elsewhere:

When the history in things and the history in bodies are perfectly attuned to each other ... then the actor does exactly what he has to, the ‘only thing there was to do’, as we say, without even needing to know what he is doing.

(Bourdieu 1993: 46)

Due to this homology, attending an elite university becomes, for these students, a naturalized process and reinforces the position of the school in the field. For Bourdieu, fields function at this juncture of individual *institutional* history, which is always situated within the broader collective history of the institutional field, and the history of the agent themselves.

Individuals embody the structure of the field and the history of the institution within their choices. From the perspective of the school, aspirations to attend elite universities and the

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circuits of education they form function as a valuable form of symbolic capital within the field.

Hobsbawm (2007) argues that ‘the past has a central stake in Bourdieu’s work since it constitutes the soil in which the present’s roots are plunged’ and yet, within the sociology of education, Bourdieu’s approach to history has been relatively rarely used, particularly in combination with field theory (Maton 2004; Gamsu 2016). Drawing on empirical data, I will theorize student aspirations in two elite state schools in London as the product of institutional histories of struggles for position within the field, in which aspirations to attend elite universities have gradually become normalized. I begin by describing in greater depth Bourdieu’s approach to history and how we can combine this with field theory and circuits of education to explore contemporary aspirations of students choosing elite universities.

### **Bourdieu’s Historical Analysis, Field Theory and ‘Circuits of Education’**

With notable exceptions (Naidoo 2004; Bathmaker 2015), field has not drawn as much attention as other concepts in Bourdieu’s oeuvre within higher education research. Habitus has been used more often to understand the relationship between institutions and student identities. For schools in particular, the concept of ‘institutional habitus’ (Reay 1998; Reay et al. 2001) has been developed to understand how institutional practices become embedded in and shape individual aspirations. This concept has been the subject of some controversy (Atkinson 2011; Burke, Emmerich and Ingram 2013) and is explored elsewhere in this volume (see Tarabini and Curran; Forbes and Maxwell; Stich and Cipollone). While institutional habitus is a useful tool, Bourdieu’s approach to field allows us to see how schools seek to accumulate symbolic capital and advantage within interrelated hierarchies of

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institutions. Tied closely to field theory, symbolic capital has the capacity to impose legitimacy on a vision of the world, hence defining the rules of the game and the field's structure (Bourdieu 1987). Bourdieu (1996) developed an approach to studying institutions in the educational field most clearly in his analysis of the field of *grandes écoles* as part of the broader French field of power. A particularly valuable section explored the 'structural history' of elite French higher education and how these institutions gained dominant positions in the field through historical struggles for symbolic markers of success. This historical analysis of interrelated institutional change allowed an understanding of how the rules, norms and standards of what it meant to be an elite university were shaped; these phenomena in turn shaped the experiences and expectations of students. The way contemporary students' aspirations are used by institutions as markers of success has a long history within UK education and this research considers how contemporary aspirations also *respond to* and *reflect* this institutional history of, as well as current struggles for, position takings within the field.

In his approach to field theory, Bourdieu emphasized the importance of the long processes of accumulation of prestige and power by institutions. His approach underlines the value of understanding how aspirations are formed through institutional histories. Students' aspirations to attend elite universities stem from a set of dispositions that may be shaped by personal habitus depending on gender, class or ethnicity, but are also inculcated by the schools' contemporary and historical institutional practices (Reay et al. 2005; Ingram 2011; Forbes and Maxwell, this volume). The interaction between individual habitus and school histories of status accrual within the field of education embeds students' aspirations in historical processes of the accumulation of symbolic capital by schools.

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Every historical action brings together two states of history: objectified history, i.e. the history which has accumulated over the passage of time in things, machines, buildings, monuments, books, theories, customs, law, etc.; and embodied history, in the form of habitus ... the institution – becomes historical action, i.e. enacted, active history, only if it is taken in charge by agents whose own history predisposes them to do so, who, by virtue of their previous investments, are inclined to take an interest in its functioning, and endowed with the appropriate attributes to make it function. (Bourdieu 1981: 305–6)

Bourdieu insists on understanding how choices and perceptions of the subject engrained in personal habitus combine with, and thus enact, the longer history of the institution in the field. The ‘objectified’ historical struggles of institutions to accrue symbolic capital within the field of education underpin the aspirations of students in these two schools. Capital, in this case the symbolic capital of students winning places at elite universities, is a form of ‘accumulated labour’ (Bourdieu 1986), and it is enacted through the combining of institutional history and embodied individual aspirations.

### **The Context and the Accrual of Symbolic Capital within the Field**

In the United Kingdom, the number of students gaining entry to elite universities has long been a marker of institutional secondary school status. The rules of the game and the struggle over the ‘principle[s] of domination’ (Bourdieu 1996: 265) of the post-16 educational field/s have a specific geography and in the UK the dominant schools remain concentrated in London and the south-east of England. Steedman (1987), focusing on the attempts of



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selective, state-funded grammar schools to replicate 'public' school norms in the early twentieth century, noted that winning places at Oxbridge was already a key indicator of institutional prestige. Increasing or maintaining the number of students winning places at elite universities remains a key institutional strategy for the accumulation of symbolic capital. 'Winning places' serves a symbolic function, marking the school out from its local peers as a conduit to national institutions associated with middle-class and elite social reproduction (Bourdieu 1996: 197–201). For prospective parents and students, these university successes are a clear sign the school is working as a node in trajectories of social and academic success.

The way these circuits of education between school and university work as a form of symbolic capital is not static – it is not simply embedded as an architectural form, maintained economically as an endowment or fee income, or physically embodied by the long-term presence of certain staff. Rather, symbolic capital forms dynamically through the flow of students 'upward' to certain universities or courses. This understanding of symbolic capital and institutional position within the field sees institutions not as 'formed wholes' but rather as 'forming and formative processes' (Williams 1977: 128). Drawing upon circuits of education, we see a dynamic of socio-spatial trajectories where young people move through geographical space, transitioning from one educational institution to another. These circuits, and the aspirations of the students who operate within them, are historically formed. Their movements become valuable capital for the institution they are part of. As I will explore below, schools have historically invested time and energy in developing 'traditions' of sending students to elite universities. Schools come to serve as conduits on paths of aspiration for multiple generations of students. Aspiration becomes bound into institutional projects and histories of managing and creating prestige, processes which are sedimented over decades, if not, in the case of some schools, centuries.

## Methodology

To situate this analysis of aspiration within a Bourdieusian historical analysis of field and circuits of education, I draw on interviews with two senior teachers from two elite state schools in London and focus groups with students at one of the schools. Halsham School is a state-funded faith school serving a religious community which became increasingly middle class over the twentieth century. King Henry's School for Boys is now once again a selective grammar school, having been a non-selective 'comprehensive' secondary school between 1975 and 1994. This status was deliberately transformed in an institutional project of restoration described below. At King Henry's School for Boys, four focus groups with 21 students in their final year were undertaken in March 2014. Just under half were from clearly professional/managerial middle-class families, with other parents from a mixture of other white-collar or more clearly working-class backgrounds. In keeping with the school's increasing ethnic minority intake drawn from London's suburbs, over half of the sample were from families of Indian or Sri Lankan heritage. Both teachers taught at the schools from the 1980s through to the early 2010s. Halsham and King Henry's form part of a cluster of elite, 'super-state' schools in London which now compete with the capital's historic elite fee-paying schools to win places at elite universities (Gamsu 2017).

The institutional trajectories of both schools discussed here have included a conscious decision to re-introduce forms of tacit or explicit selection with the aim of competing with the independent sector. At both schools, students' aspirations to attend elite universities became part of 'cumulative' processes of institutional advantage, with the circuits of education linking these schools to elite universities created and maintained by 30–40 year strategies

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designed to reinforce academic selection. In these highly selective institutional contexts, 'aspiration' to attend elite universities must be seen as the result of long-term institutional strategies that sought to re-position these state schools closer to the dominant sub-field of London's elite private schools. As will be made clear below, students' aspirations clearly sit within and are in part framed by these institutional histories; their 'choices' simultaneously respond to and act to shape an institution's position within the local and national field of post-16 education. Choice and aspiration occur at the juncture of 'corporeal complicity' between the individual, the institution's history and the rules of the field in which that institution sits.

### **Institutional Histories: Framing the Development of Elite Aspirations**

#### *Halsham School: The 'Cumulative' Processes of Student Aspiration and Institutional Success*

Halsham School felt the need to re-position itself during the 1980s to reflect the changing socio-economic and geographical position of the faith group the school serves. Over the twentieth century the school re-located twice.<sup>3</sup> This process of re-location reflected the growing affluence of fractions of the community who were moving away from the inner-city towards the wealthier suburbs. By the 1980s a substantial number of families were opting into the fee-paying independent sector, depriving the school of potentially higher-attaining students. At Halsham School, I interviewed Susan, the school's former assistant head. She described how, with the arrival of a new head in 1985, the school deliberately set out to attract students who were otherwise attending local private schools.

Susan: And then Lucy [the new head] took over and she made it her mission to increase the able children coming into the school and ... she did, she was immensely successful ... All the children were interviewed, not with a view to 'You can come and you can't come'. But with a view to finding out about them ... And she would actually say to parents at the interview, 'If you send your child here, if you come here, I'll guarantee you a place.' And she would say that to a number of the able children to try and switch, swing this balance. And she was very successful and we had things called accelerated classes which ... generated enough momentum to increase the able intake.

Sol: Where were the more able students going if not [to Halsham School]?

Susan: ... it was independent schools that were the main competitors for the able children. So we would then have a situation where we started to get a better intake and as those students go through you get better results and better university whatever.

What we see in Susan's response is how Halsham School adopted institutional strategies that sought to adapt to the rising affluence amongst the faith community served by the school. It did this by *gradually* creating selective environments and slowly building up an academic reputation. Adopting internal streaming and tacit selection reflected the policies of Conservative governments of the 1980s that sought to encourage 'differentiation within schools' (Lowe 1989). These urban demographic and political changes affected Halsham's position in the field, stimulating strategies which sought to re-position the school within the dominant sub-field of elite London schools.

In considering the composition of Halsham School and the importance of getting the right 'balance' of students, Susan was also keenly aware of the importance of fostering links to elite universities to meet families' aspirations:

when I was head of sixth form and Lucy Bergman was head of school, we really worked hard, we worked our socks off to keep these high-ability children and we had liaisons, I spent a huge amount of time liaising with Oxbridge, with Russell Group, I went out to umpteen meetings ... I mean [now] it's something like, 70 something per cent go to Russell Group, but that's, that's the staff. And then each year the kids go, 'My friend went to Nottingham. Can I go to Nottingham?' It becomes a cumulative thing really.

Susan described the great efforts taken to first attract and then maintain able students from families wealthy enough to afford independent education. Halsham School clearly made great efforts to create similar ties to elite universities as the independent fee-paying schools had. The large proportion of students attending the 24 self-selecting research-intensive 'Russell Group' universities became a 'cumulative' process, with students knowing friends and peers at these institutions and wanting to attend them themselves. We see with Halsham how student aspirations to attend elite institutions are not merely the result of a family habitus of higher education choice (Reay 1998). They exist within institutional histories of accumulation of advantage, prestige and reputation and the repeated patterns of circuits of education. Thus, students' aspirations are partly the result of what Bourdieu (1986) would call the 'accumulated history' of schools' efforts to distinguish themselves as elite within the field.

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*King Henry's School: Naturalizing Elite University Choices within a Project of Institutional Restoration*

King Henry's Boys' School had converted from a selective grammar to a comprehensive school in the mid-1970s. Under a new head, who took over in the mid-1980s, there was a move firstly to restore the school's 'traditional values' of 'manners and learning' with a system of stricter discipline (Interview with deputy head, 2014). According to the deputy head who had joined the school in 1986, once this shift in the 'pastoral' culture of the school had been achieved, increasing student numbers meant they could think about re-introducing tacit and later explicit forms of selection. To avoid interference from the Local Education Authority, which was opposed to selection, in 1989 the school became a 'grant-maintained' school, opting out of local government control. Using this institutional autonomy allowed selection, initially by interview where parents and students were 'rated according to whether they were in tune with the aspirations of the school' (Interview with deputy head, 2014). From 1994 selection was more formally re-introduced through the return of an entrance exam. These aspirations were strongly oriented towards returning to the selective past of the school and an elite school identity. Already in 1991, national newspapers described the school as 'more like a public school', with high exam results and a strong emphasis on rugby union.

In keeping with this return to selection and re-positioning of the school within the sub-field of elite schools, students at King Henry's were focused on a sub-set of elite universities. Ten students in my focus groups had at least one parent who had been to university, of whom four attended a 'Russell Group' university. However, except for two students whose parents

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had attended King's College London (KCL), students were not from families who had direct experience of the 'golden triangle' of the elite universities of London (KCL, UCL, LSE and Imperial), Oxford and Cambridge. These universities, and to a lesser extent the universities of Bristol, Durham, Exeter and Warwick, dominate access to elite positions across a range of professions (Wakeling and Savage 2015). It was precisely this group of universities that students, encouraged by the school, were aiming to apply for:

Sol: And in terms of universities, what places do people tend to go on to?

Yajnash: Oxbridge

Sol: Yeah, Oxbridge and Russell Group, everyone goes there ... are other universities like even on the menu, or?

Vidu: Yeah there are, like UCL's got quite a lot of people going there.

Chitesh: The main ones the school tends to focus on for the science ones are UCL, King's and Imperial. I think for history and things like that, Warwick and maybe Durham, um ...

Sanjeev: There's like kind of ten unis that they look at. Oxbridge, UCL, LSE, Bristol, Warwick, Durham and that's kind of ...

Chitesh: So generally high-achieving ones. (Focus Group 3, King Henry's Boys)

In keeping with Wakeling and Savage's (2015) findings on the hierarchies *within* the field of elite higher education, the school focuses not simply on the 'Russell Group', but on a smaller sub-set of elite institutions within that grouping. In producing these aspirations and academic results, which place King Henry's on par with the most academically successful of the UK's private schools, family habitus strongly combined with the school's recent history of

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restoring its status as an elite school. Familial desire for educational success, discussed elsewhere in the interviews, in keeping with the literature describing the focus amongst British Asian families on educational success (Modood 2004, 2012), combined tightly with a very distinct institutional orientation towards a small group of institutions:

Hiren: We've always kind of been put in that direction so we've had like talks and stuff, like Cambridge talks and Oxbridge talks and stuff. Um, yeah, so it's just been a way of life really.

Girish: I think you're just like expected to go to one of the top places.

Hiren: You don't think twice about it, it's just ...

Girish: Yeah, you're just like expected to go to one of the top unis.

Hiren: That's the way it is.

Girish: Yeah. (Focus Group 4, King Henry's Boys)

Naturalization and acceptance of the school's focus on elite universities is very clear here. What was at work was the combining of a strong 'education-oriented' (Nitin, Focus Group 1) familial focus on what students will study at university and where with the school's orientation towards elite universities. What was at work was not simply student and familial aspirations; the school's deliberate focus on a small sub-set of universities plays into the longer history of accumulation of symbolic capital and prestige through which the school's position in the field of education has been re-created. Elite university aspirations are being formed through the combination of familial aspiration and accumulated institutional history, 'the seemingly inextricable dialectic that obtains between the mental structures and the objective structures of the institution' (Bourdieu 1996: 29).



## **Discussion: A Historical-Institutional Approach to Aspiration**

This chapter has sought to examine how we can understand the formation of aspirations in the context of institutional strategies that aim to re-position schools within an elite sub-field of London schools that dominate access to elite UK universities. Student aspirations are understood here as ‘the interaction of two histories and his [sic] present is the meeting of two pasts’ (Bourdieu 1981: 315), that of the institution and that of the individual themselves.

Using Bourdieu, we are reminded as sociologists of the need to embed history, the intersection of biography with the history of social structures within and throughout our analysis. Bourdieu’s approach to structural history emphasized the importance of understanding how institutions struggle within the field to accumulate symbolic capital. This allows us to see how changing conditions and rules of the field for a broader hierarchy of schools affect individual institutions. Both King Henry’s and Halsham responded to shifting demographic and political conditions by employing long-term strategies which deliberately sought to shape individual choices and aspirations.

The last section examined how students’ subjective perceptions regarding where they aspire to go at the end of their school careers are tied into these longer histories of institutional strategizing. Conscious decisions about where to study may not entail a reflection on the long historical processes which have normalized attending certain universities within the culture of particular schools. However, from the perspective of senior teachers with long careers at these schools, it becomes clear that these choices are cumulative processes. From this perspective, aspirations are not simply the result of familial influences but form part of institutional strategies of selection, embedded over years of repeated circuits

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of education carefully encouraged and maintained by these schools to allow the accumulation of symbolic capital. Students' aspirations and movements to elite universities furnish schools with prestige – through their lives they enact and embody the joining of objective institutional history with their own subjective trajectories. These trajectories are spatial, representing movements between schools and universities across geographical space (see Forbes and Maxwell, this volume). Here I have used the concept of circuits of education from the work of Ball et al. (1995) to suggest how the sedimented patterns of aspiration fostered by institutions involve particular geographies of university destinations. Geographies of education were generally implicit rather than explicit in Bourdieu's analysis of education and as a result his theory is best used in combination with other theory.

### **Conclusion: History and Educational Hierarchy as Processes of Accumulation**

By combining field, circuits and institutional history we can see how aspirations are formed by and help create patterns of accumulation within institutions. Circuits allow us to see how students' aspirations create socio-spatial trajectories which are fostered and managed by institutions in slow processes which result in the gradual accumulation of symbolic capital. Accumulation of capital through human labour was central to Bourdieu's sociology (Savage 2017), and this chapter has shown how aspirations are tied into the accrual of capital for schools attempting to re-position themselves within the field. I have explored aspiration in three ways that build on Bourdieu's approach to history: in the coming together of institution and individual, the structural history which shapes the rules of the field, and the processes of accumulation which all dominant institutions must master. This historical element to Bourdieu's work is sometimes overlooked within the sociology of education in the English-

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speaking world (Gorski 2013). It is worth remembering that Bourdieu saw the ‘creation of a unified social science, where history would be a historical sociology of the past and sociology a social history of the present’ (Bourdieu and Raphael 1995: 111) as a central aim of the journal he edited, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*. History remains a potent tool to critically understand the sociology of aspirations in the present, and Bourdieu’s historical analysis provides rich terrain for further work in the sociology of education.

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## **Recommended Further Reading**

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<sup>1</sup> The post-16 educational phase in UK education refers to the final 2–3 years of compulsory education for students aged 16–18/19. Post-16 includes schools with a ‘sixth form’ (state or private), Further Education (FE) Colleges and sixth-form colleges.

<sup>2</sup> All institutional and individual names are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> On the history of outward relocation of elite schools from central London to the suburbs, see my paper in *Urban Studies* (Gamsu 2016).